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How U.S. tricked Sudan on airlift

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THE REAGAN administration deceived the government of Sudan into believing that the CIA was not taking 800 Ethiopian Jews to Israel — in an effort to protect last week's airlift operation and prevent a Moslem fundamentalist backlash against Sudanese President Gaafar Nimeiri.

Last week's CIA-sponsored airlift, code-named Operation Moses, was a classic tale of high international intrigue.

In fact, the American public would never have known about the airlift if a reporter from the Los Angeles Times had not happened upon a remote airstrip in Gederaf, Sudan in the dead of night last Friday. There he saw the refugees, known as Falashas, boarding eight C-130 Hercules transport planes bound for a secret location in Israel.

Many details about the operation remain secret and the administration says the it is too sensitive to talk discuss.

But sources confirmed last night that Vice President

George Bush, the State Dept. and the CIA were forced to deceive the Sudanese government into believing that the Falashas were not being airlifted to Israel in an effort to gain Sudanese cooperation.

Officials do not expect relations between the U.S. and President Nimeiri to be affected by the deception however. Nimeiri is expected to visit the U.S. next week.

U.S. officials also say that President Reagan and military and intelligence chiefs are "extremely pleased" with the results of the operation — which they said was "morally sound" and went off with split-second timing.

The plight of the Falashas began last January, at the height of international concern over the famine in Ethiopia, when Israel began secretly airlifting 7700 Ethiopian Jews out of the drought

stricken nation as a humanitarian gesture.

But word of the Israeli operation leaked out in February and Nimeiri, who presides over a strict Moslem fundamentalist nation, was denounced throughout the Arab world.

He called off the airlift to Israel and said publicly that he would no longer help Israel — though he added that he did not care if the Falashas went somewhere else.

When the airlift was called off, there were between 800 and 900 Falashas remaining at a refugee camp at Tawana.

The U.S. got into the act during Bush's visit to the Sudan on March 6 when, during a meeting in Khartoum, Nimeiri said he had no objection to the U.S. getting involved in airlift.

But he repeated that he would not support an airlift of the refugees if their destination was Israel.

What Nimeiri did not know, — was that the U.S. was working with the Israeli government all along.

The CIA devised the plan with the help of the Israeli government and the U.S. Air Force.

Sources said that the U.S., in an effort to gain Nimeiri's approval — or at least to give him the ability to deny that he knowingly assisted Israel — filed a flight plan with the Sudanese government indicating that the Falashas would be taken to Europe.

The transport planes were flown from West Germany to the dirt airstrip in Gedaref at dawn last Friday and the Falashas were quickly boarded and taken to Israel — making one stop to refuel in another African country.

The only hitch occurred when Charles Powers, the Los Angeles Times reporter showed up at the airstrip.

He was taken into custody by Sudanese officials but was released after a few hours.

Powers returned to Khartoum, the capital, and after the story broke the Sudanese police tried to arrest him again. He took refuge in the home of an American diplomat and police surrounded the building.

After frantic phone calls to Washington, L.A. Times executives interrupted National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane at the Gridiron Dinner and had him place a call to the Sudanese government to call off Powers' arrest.

President Reagan was understandably upset over the newspaper's disclosure of what was supposed to be a secret operation.

On the whole, though, U.S. officials from the President on down are enormously pleased by the outcome of the airlift, which achieved its humanitarian purpose and improved our relations with Israel.